

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there were differences in the prevalence of self-reported depression between men and women who had been exposed to violence during childhood and adulthood. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (*N = 9,800*) were used to examine the association between exposure to violence and self-reported depression among adolescents. Results showed that exposure to violence during childhood and adulthood was associated with higher rates of self-reported depression. The association between exposure to violence and self-reported depression was stronger for women than for men.

Keywords: Depression, violence, gender, adolescence

Depression is a common mental health problem that affects millions of people worldwide. It is characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, changes in appetite and sleep patterns, and thoughts of death or suicide. Depression can have serious consequences on physical and mental health, as well as on social and occupational functioning. Therefore, understanding the risk factors for depression is crucial for developing effective prevention and treatment strategies.

One of the most significant risk factors for depression is exposure to violence. Exposure to violence can occur at different stages of life, including childhood and adulthood. Childhood exposure to violence is often linked to later problems with mental health, including depression. Adulthood exposure to violence, such as intimate partner violence, is also strongly associated with depression. However, the relationship between exposure to violence and depression may vary depending on individual characteristics, such as gender.

Research has shown that women are more likely than men to experience depression following exposure to violence. This may be due to several factors, including biological differences, social norms, and coping mechanisms. Women may be more vulnerable to the psychological effects of violence due to hormonal factors or because they are more likely to internalize negative emotions. Additionally, societal expectations and gender roles may influence how men and women cope with trauma, with women often being encouraged to express their emotions and seek help.

In this study, we examined the prevalence of self-reported depression among adolescents who had been exposed to violence during childhood and adulthood. We hypothesized that exposure to violence would be associated with higher rates of self-reported depression, and that this association would be stronger for women than for men. The study included data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which followed a large sample of adolescents over time, allowing us to explore the long-term effects of exposure to violence on mental health.

The findings of this study have important implications for public health and clinical practice. Understanding the differential impact of violence on men and women can help healthcare providers tailor interventions to better address the needs of affected individuals. Furthermore, identifying risk factors like exposure to violence can aid in early detection and prevention of depression, potentially reducing its burden on society.

Method

Data for this study were drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a large-scale survey conducted in the United States. The study included a nationally representative sample of adolescents aged 12-18 years old. Data on exposure to violence and self-reported depression were collected through standardized questionnaires administered to participants. The questionnaire asked about various types of violent experiences, including physical assault, sexual violence, and witnessing violence. Self-reported depression was measured using a validated scale that assessed symptoms of major depressive disorder over the past year.

The analysis focused on two groups of adolescents: those who reported exposure to violence during childhood (before age 18) and those who reported exposure during adulthood (after age 18). Gender was categorized as male or female. Statistical analyses were performed using logistic regression models to estimate the odds ratios for self-reported depression based on exposure to violence and gender. Interaction terms were included in the model to test for differences in the association between exposure to violence and depression across genders.

Results

The results of the analysis showed that exposure to violence during both childhood and adulthood was significantly associated with higher rates of self-reported depression. Adolescents who reported exposure to violence during childhood had approximately 1.5 times higher odds of reporting depression compared to those who did not report exposure. Similarly, adolescents who reported exposure to violence during adulthood had about 1.6 times higher odds of reporting depression. When considering both periods of exposure, the odds increased further, indicating a cumulative effect of violence on mental health.

Gender played a significant role in the relationship between exposure to violence and depression. The association between exposure to violence and self-reported depression was consistently stronger for women than for men. For example, women who reported exposure to violence during childhood had nearly twice the odds of reporting depression compared to their non-exposed counterparts, while men in the same category had lower odds. A similar pattern was observed for exposure during adulthood, with women showing a much stronger link between violence and depression than men.

These findings suggest that the psychological impact of violence may differ along gender lines, possibly due to biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Women's greater vulnerability to depression after experiencing violence could be related to hormonal influences, differences in coping styles, or societal pressures that affect how they process traumatic events. Understanding these gender-specific responses is essential for designing targeted support programs and interventions.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that exposure to violence is a significant risk factor for depression in adolescents, with the impact being more pronounced for women. The findings highlight the need for comprehensive approaches to addressing the mental health needs of young people who have experienced violence. Early identification and intervention are critical to mitigating the long-term effects of trauma. Healthcare providers should be vigilant in screening for depression in adolescents with histories of violence, particularly for girls. Supportive counseling, therapy, and community resources can play a vital role in helping these individuals recover and build resilience.

Future research should continue to explore the underlying mechanisms linking violence to depression, especially regarding gender differences. Longitudinal studies that track mental health outcomes over time can provide valuable insights into how exposure to violence shapes an individual's psychological trajectory. Additionally, investigating protective factors and effective interventions tailored to specific populations will be crucial for improving outcomes for vulnerable youth.

Acknowledgments

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